



Prison Programs Trying to Help Inmates Back into Society



April 22, 2014

Currently, some 1.6 million people in the United States are behind bars. About 650,000 of them are released from state and federal prisons every year. But studies show that within three years of release, two-thirds of them are likely to be rearrested, with half of those returning to prison. Why does the United States have such a high level of recidivism? And what makes it so hard for former inmates to re-enter society? Some answers in this special report by CCTV's Roza Kazan.

Leslie Brown is a busy woman these days – running a support center for women just out of prison. Over two decades ago – she was one of them.

“I was charged with the max, with murder,” Brown says.

Brown was granted clemency after serving seven years of a 20-year sentence – for conspiring to commit murder her abusive husband.

Six years later, she opened Leslie's Place in her own home in Chicago, to women released from prison.

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“I had no money when God gave me the vision to do this. And I just took the ladies for the first three years and nobody paid me anything. I just wanted to help them so they wouldn’t have to go back to prison”

And so she helps them by getting state IDs and birth certificates and giving them clothes, toiletries, bus cards and computer training. She says while in prison she saw too many women come back.

“They would tell me there is no resources for women. Most of them had drug cases and they would always end up back because they said they couldn’t find a job, they had no money, they had no housing, and those things would cause them go back and do the same thing and get incarcerated again. It was a revolving door”

Regina Givens is one of those women. At 49, she altogether spent over a decade behind bars. She’s now on electronic monitoring, and could have stayed with her daughter. But she chose to come here.

“It just pushes me more to do more what I need to do for myself. Every program I can get in I am in it, any program, any help I can get, I am going for it, because I can’t go back to prison,” says Givens.

Leslie hopes Regina will be one of the nearly 90 percent of women enrolled at her center who never go back to prison.

But the reality is more than half of former inmates in the United States are re-incarcerated within three years after their release.

Walter Boyd is the Executive Director at St. Leonard’s Ministries in Chicago– a re-entry program that provides free counseling, food, housing and classes. He believes the stigma of having a criminal record is the main reason why so many former prisoners fail to rejoin the mainstream.

“They are many employers who knowingly will not hire someone with a criminal record,” says Boyd.

In fact, most employers in the United States include a criminal background question on their job applications – something staff here believes is a major barrier.

“You fill out that application, you get that box and if you check it: yes, I’ve been arrested, or incarcerated, the person doing the hiring for the job, as soon as he sees that check, he throws in the garbage,” says Victor Gaskins, the Program Director.

This has even sprung the so-called, “Ban-the-Box” movement. A campaign aimed at persuading employers to refrain from asking job applicants about their criminal history. Despite what the name suggests, supporters say they want to keep the criminal inquiry – but ask employers to move it to a later stage in the hiring process.

“There should be a rational relationship between what is it that you are asking a person to do and how does their past impact that work,” says Boyd.

Over 45 U.S. cities and counties and seven states have banned the box on government job applications. A major retailer, Target, joined in last October. But some experts say that's not enough.

Michael Sweig is a former lawyer. In 1997, he voluntarily gave up his law license, pleaded guilty to a financial felony, served four years of probation. Sweig believes the lack of education, not the lack of jobs, is fueling recidivism. Sweig is the Founder of the Citizens' Institute School for People with Criminal Records.

"On any given day in the U.S. there are four million people on probation and one million on parole so five million people – not incarcerated. 70-80% of all those people are legally learning-disabled – that they read 2-3 levels below their age or grade."

This is why Sweig's written a bill to the Illinois House and Senate on incentivized education. A system that would require as a condition of probation that all criminal defendants continue their education in exchange for time credits.

"If you've got a certificate, a degree, a diploma – you bring that to your probation office and that automatically reduces your probation sentence"

For instructors back at St. Leonard's, the focus is on the basics: how to build up self-esteem and teach former inmates to find jobs in today's internet-driven world.

"When they take our class, they learn how to make an online job application, work with email and upload their resumes," says Lynne Cunningham, Director of the Michael Barlow Center at St. Leonard's Ministries.

It's a complex problem – a challenge which officials at an Illinois prison say they strive to address even before the inmates get out.

Sheridan Correctional Center calls itself a therapeutic community, one of only two Illinois prisons dedicated to helping prisoners with addiction.

Three hours a day, inmates there are in cognitive behavior therapy treatment, which officials believe will help them make better choices once out in the community.

"Abuse and addiction have to be addressed by the way that you think and the decisions and choices that you make on a day-to-day basis," says Marcus Hardy, Warden, Sheridan Correctional Center.

Another three hours a day inmates spend in class – like shipping and warehousing or welding.

To serve their sentence here, they must apply, and the smallest deviation in discipline will get them transferred back to other correctional facilities. For many, serving here has become a life-altering choice.

Michael McNeil, an inmate at Sheridan, says, "If I was at another facility, I wouldn't have been thinking positively – to better myself, I would have been doing the regular stuff that everyone else does, which is wake up, eat, work out and go back to sleep"

"I might have been dead on the road I was going in," says inmate Cerriado Walton.

The cost of housing an inmate at the Sheridan Correctional Facility is nearly \$28,000 a year. That's 30% higher than the average cost at a correctional facility in the state of Illinois but prison officials here say the higher cost is worth the investment. One number, they say, speaks for itself.

Right now the department's recidivism rate is roughly 48%; the recidivism rate at Sheridan is about 20% lower.

Warden Hardy says classes and hands-on experience will allow inmates to work in fields with no licensing requirements – or even start their own businesses. “Our goal is to take an offender and turn him not into a tax consumer but into a taxpayer. So the question is – where is your dollar better spent?”

John Prince is an ex-Sheridan inmate. With three prison sentences behind him, he's now working on his associate degree at St. Leonard's.

“You are out of prison but you still need some help. You are on your own basically with just \$20 and a train ticket so where do you go from there It's the skills you need and reintegration programs”

And that, experts say, could be just one of the pieces needed to break the cycle of revolving-door incarceration in the U.S., one of the highest in the world.